

BOOK SERIALISATION

An Analysis

The Sepoy Rebellion of 1857-59

(The first thirteen chapters of this book were

serialised in DJ from July 1999 till October last year. This analysis covers the first 150 pages, and is now being serialised in DJ).

Columnist AH AMIN re-interprets the so-called 1857 Indian Mutiny.

Now, the above calculation leaves us with 10,875 which may have been used in the entire fighting distributed in penny packets since major fighting was done at Delhi, Lucknow and Kanpure by irregular units raised in Punjab and Frontier. A glance at units employed at Delhi and Lucknow puts at rest all doubts about the ethnic composition of the native troops:-

Delhi

1st Punjab Cavalry	Sikhs - Punjabi Muslims Pathans-Some Hindustani Muslims.
2nd Punjab Cavalry	Sikhs - Pathans - Punjabi Muslims - Some Hindustani Muslims
5th Punjab Cavalry	As above
Hodson's Irregular Force	Sikhs/Punjabi Muslims
Sirmoor Battalion	Gurkha
Kumqon Battalion	Gurkha
Corps of Guides	Pathan/Sikh/Punjabi Muslims
4th Sikh Infantry	Sikh + Punjabi Muslims
1st Punjab Infantry	Sikh - Punjabi Muslims - Pathan
2nd Punjab Infantry	ditto
4th Punjab Infantry	ditto
Baluch Battalion	Baluchis

Note:- It may be noted that the Hindustani Muslims/Ranghars were the nucleus of all new Punjab Cavalry as well as Infantry units raised during the period 1846-56 including the Corps of Guides.

Lucknow - March 1858

1st Sikh Irregular Cavalry	Sikh - Punjabi Muslims
2nd Punjab Cavalry	Sikh - Punjabi Muslims - Pathan
5th Punjab Cavalry	Sikh - Punjabi Muslims - Pathan
Oudh Irregular Cavalry	Sikh, Punjabi Muslims
1st Punjab Cavalry	Sikh - Punjabi Muslims - Pathan

Hodson's Horse	Sikh - Punjabi Muslims
Regiment of Ferozepur	Sikh Pure
4th Punjab Rifles	Sikh - Punjabi Muslims - Pathan
2nd Punjab Infantry	Sikh - Punjabi Muslims - Pathan

It is interesting to note that 5th Punjab Infantry in its regimental history claims to have killed Subedar Bakht Khan the sepoy leader at Delhi in the Nawab Ganj area in 1858. It was stated in the history of the Frontier Force Rifles compiled by W.E.H. Condon and published in 1953⁵⁴⁰ that Naik Habibullah and sepoy Fateh Singh of 5th Punjab Infantry killed Subedar Bakht Khan in the Oudh Nepal rain forest area of Terai in 1858 and both of these soldiers were awarded the Indian Order of Merit. John Lawrence the Chief Commissioner of Punjab in his letter dated 25 May 1858 appended in the Punjab Mutiny reports addressed to Mr. Edwonstone, Secretary to the Government of India stated the composition of the Irregular Forces of Punjab as following 541:-

1. Muslims - Punjabi - 24,027
2. Sikhs - 13,344
3. Hillmen - 2,203
4. Hindustanis - 2,430
5. Hindus - Punjabi - 5,336
6. Christians - 16

Our aim is not to condemn any caste or community but to merely analyse the figures and dismiss baseless myths that Muslims were the foremost anti-British people in India in 1857. Why the Punjabi Muslims did not join Hindustani Muslims is a complicated question. It was not certainly opportunism alone because of which they remained loyal. There were other reasons for this loyalty which we will discuss in the subsequent part of this analysis. It is important to analyse another person or race's point of view rather than despising them. We despise the Afghan King, however, because he could have gained much more than a paltry sum of 12 lakh rupees per year! He by intervention could even have created conditions which would have led to participation of Punjabi Muslims and Pathans in support of the "Rebel Hindustani sepoys". Unfortunately Dost Mohammad Khan failed to muster the resolution which had made him famous in 1840!

Muslims as Major Leaders

The period before 1857 was that of EEIC supremacy starting from its capture of Delhi in 1803. Before 1803 the Mahrattas were masters of Delhi. But in 1857 we find that the Mahrattas main leader Nana Sahib did not get any support from the main Mahratta area of Bombay presidency. He was supported by the Hindustani Bengal Army sepoy who had little connection with Mahrattas by race. Actually some of the sepoy regiments which rebelled at Cawnpore marched to Lucknow. We see in 1857 the predominantly Hindu Regiments of Bengal Army marching to predominantly Muslim centres of rebellion i.e. Delhi and Lucknow. Bahadur Shah Zafar has to be given credit for at least preserving Hindu Muslim unity in Delhi in 1857. He undertook various measures to do so like banning cow slaughter in Delhi.

As per Percival Spear who is considered to be a very reliable authority on Indo-Pak history:—

"On 19 May, Maulvi Muhammad Sayyid set up the standard of Jihad or holy war in the Jamia Masjid; he was immediately ordered to remove it by the King. The Maulvi explained that it was intended against the Hindus, where upon the king declared that Hindus and Muslims were alike to him. Hindu army officers also complained and were tactfully told that it had been intended against the English 542".

It seems that Hindu opinion just like Muslim opinion was divided. But this appears odd only to those who take Hindus or Muslims as two nations in Indo-Pak sub-continent. If you analyse the Hindu as the UP Hindu or the Maharashtra Hindu and the Muslim as Hindustani Muslim or Punjabi Muslim their differences do not appear odd. Thus we find the Hindustani Hindu acknowledging the Mughal Muslim as king of India in 1857 because culturally they could identify with him more than the Maharashtra Hindu to whom the Mughal king was the descendant of a dynasty of Muslim tyrants.

We find the Oudh Talukdars most of whom were Hindu Rajputs acknowledging the Nawab of Lucknow Birjis Kadar a Muslim as their Nawab and ruler. The rebels were thus not organised on communal lines. Hindu acknowledged Muslim political supremacy by and large. Nana Sahib had a more limited following and his own people i.e. Mahrattas never rebelled in his favour. The Bombay Army and Maharashtra as a region stayed loyal to the EEIC. It appears that the Hindustani and Bombay or Punjab people had little in common. This behaviour further reinforces the theory that India or even Pakistan are not; or cannot be strictly defined as countries but rather a marriage of convenience of a multiple member of nationalities. The foundation of both the states is on mutual fear; and continuance of this confrontation alone can guarantee survival of both; off course at the expense of the smaller minority ethnic groups in both the states.

But the positive side of the rebellion was that at least it was the first major outbreak in which Indians combined against the British sinking their differences based on religious considerations. Communal hatred in Indo-Pak sub-continent was definitely a post-1857 development and had a deep connection with the deliberate but unwritten "divide and rule" policy of the British which finally led to the increase in communal tension in post-1857 India.

Why the Rebellion was confined to only certain regions of Indo-Pak

The primary and the first reason for this is very simple. Indo-Pak subcontinent is not one country but a number of countries which have been ruled for most part of their history by one dynasty or race from Delhi till 1947 and now from Islamabad and Delhi. The states of Pakistan and India came into existence in their present form not because the Hindu rulers at Delhi conquered Bengal or Madras or Bombay but because these areas were conquered a long time ago by the EEIC and then subsequently transferred to the British crown in 1858 and to government of India and Pakistan in 1947. The two countries came into existence primarily not because all the regions of Indo-Pak wanted this to happen but because the British simply confined their freedom of choice to two options either to join "India" or "Pakistan". The fragility of this arrangement was successfully challenged for the first time by the Muslim Bengalis who gave us a new version of "two nation theory" by proving that among the Muslims of India and Pakistan also there were two Muslim nations i.e. "West Pakistan Muslims" and "East Pakistan Muslims"! The success of regional parties in Sindh, Balochistan Madras etc. is a clear proof that both the countries consist of different and distinct nationalities. In symbolic terms this arrangement may be compared to "Sigheh or Muttaa" i.e. a marriage limited to a certain period as practiced in Iran!!

The sub-continent had been conquered by the EEIC at different periods spread over a century and different regions viewed the British in a different line. We will study some of the regions and bring out the differences.

Bengal.

This was a very populous region of India. It was ruled by a Nawab before 1757 who had no connection with the Bengalis by race. His departure from the scene in 1757 hardly made any difference to the common Bengali. Bengal in terms of population was the largest province in India in 1857. The North West provinces (Modern UP) had also been part of the Bengal province till 1836 when it was separated. The Bengali common man was a much exploited and oppressed man. But this exploitation and oppression was done by his own Bengali landlords and revenue collector class both Muslim and Hindu. The British did not change the system in this regard. They, however, brought one major change which made post-1857 Bengal one of the most politically conscious regions of India. This was in terms of educating the people. Bengal was too big a province to worry about what was happening in the rest of India. For example the Santhal uprising had little to do with the EEIC. It was an uprising of the Santhal people against oppression by money lenders and railway contractors 543. This rebellion broke out in 1855 and was suppressed by 1857 and the Bengal Army sepoys played a decisive role in suppressing it. The Hindustani sepoy of the EEIC was almost as much of a foreigner for the Bengali as the European.

The Bengalis had nothing in common with the Hindustani Brahman, Rajput or Mussulman sepoy of the Bengal Army. These sepoys were actually viewed in Bengal as mercenary watchdogs of the EEIC. Thus although there were only 2,400 European soldiers in Bengal in 1857 as compared to more than 29,000 Hindustani sepoys 544 the rebellion did not succeed. Many sepoy regiments which rebelled were hunted down by common people led by landlords who supported the European troops in destroying them.

There were hardly any Bengali in the Bengal Army and during 1857 the British did not recruit any soldiers here. Later on in early twentieth century Bengal became one of the most anti-British area, where probably the maximum number of British officials were assassinated apart from the tribal area of NWFP. But in 1857 the Bengalis were not aware enough to participate in the rebellion. They had no representation in the army so they could not have taken any part in the rebellion. They had little to share with the northwest provinces and EEIC rule had been established here exactly 100 years ago. In all probability the Bengalis were satisfied with the status quo. The Mughal emperor had no relevance to their problems and the only exposure which they had of the Mahrattas was as dacoits and plunderers who raided West Bengal in the pre-1857 era. The pre-1857 Muslim Persian/Turk Nawabs of Bengal had hardly any sympathy with the ethnic Bengali Muslim and mostly relied on Hindu officials for revenue collection.

Madras.

The rebellion found no adherents in Madras also. The Madras Army was employed in Central India and at Cawnpore and Lucknow. This does not imply that the people of the south were docile but simply because they did not identify themselves with the Hindustanis of the Gangetic plains who were far different from the Madras people. Administration of Madras presidency by the EEIC since 1760s had produced peace and security and the people were enjoying about 58 years of uninterrupted peace since the last Mysore war of 1799. But we must not forget that many parts of Madras presidency were formerly part of the Mysore State which from 1769 to 1799 had been one of the EEIC's toughest

opponent. In Madras one is inclined to believe the old theory that nations and races are like a living organism. They struggle, get tired and then sink into inactivity for some time in order to recuperate. The region had seen many wars from 1740 to 1799 and now was war weary at least in 1857. The higher proportion of Muslims in the Madras Army, however, illustrates that the Punjabi Muslims and the Pathans were not the only loyal Muslims. There were certain cases of individual mutiny in the Madras Cavalry since this had a proportion of Hindustani Muslims. However, these were isolated incidents and as a regiment no unit of Madras Army was disbanded or disarmed.

Bombay.

The Bombay Presidency comprising the western Ghats and modern day Maharashtra had seen more anarchy and bloodshed than any other part of India. This started from Sivaji's phenomenal war against the Mughals in 1660. The Mahrattas must not be underestimated, since it was the Mahratta insurgency which destroyed the Mughal empire more than any martial race of the area north of Jhelum or north of Khyber or Oxus! Since 1660 the Mahrattas had almost constantly been fighting adversaries ranging from the Nizam of Hyderabad to the Afghans and the EEIC with whom they fought some three long wars, these three wars taking place during 1775-1782, 1803-5 and the last one from 1817-18. The Mahrattas did not like the Purbiya or Hindustani and the Hindustanis also disliked this race since the Mahrattas were plunderers and looters like the Afghans (although a little more well mannered) and they were equally disliked by both Hindus and Muslims of the Gangetic plain. The word "Delhi" above all was a hateful word for a Mahratta since it was the capital of the hated Mughal who had ravaged the Mahratta home country so ruthlessly during the great Mahratta insurgency lasting from 1660 to 1707. The Mahrattas were a brave and courageous people and they shattered the myth of Muslim and Mughal invincibility which had for so long kept the non-Muslim inhabitants of the sub-continent victim of an irrational inferiority complex; that they could never win against any Muslim invaders. The Mahrattas in this regard are a unique people in sub-continental history. We are discussing the history of Mahrattas because it is felt that it was not a question of bravery or martial prowess in 1857 but that of political awareness and unfortunately this awareness was overall lacking in the majority of regions of Indo-Pak sub-continent in 1857. Thus, 1857 was a period when the people of sub-continent did not really feel that the EEIC was a foreign power which was exploiting them. Perhaps in the short term the much needed stability and order which the EEIC restored in many regions of Indo-Pak sub-continent was preferred by the people rather than a freedom struggle which may have pushed them into the pre-1917 medieval disorders and anarchic situation of Maharashtra and Central India. The greatest credit in making the people of Bombay presidency believe that the EEIC rule was best for them rests with Mountstuart Elphinstone was Resident at the Mahrattas Peshwa's court from 1810 to 1819. Mountstuart was a great scholar, historian and administrator. He loved and respected India as a country and believed that the British were not in India forever. He was a very just man and believed in delegating some power and authority to the Indians. He was a firm believer of use of local languages in the courts and routine administrative affairs. He instituted reforms, greatly improved the system of public education and in general followed extremely liberal and humanitarian policies. He loved India so much that he refused the post of Governor General of Canada⁵⁴⁵! It would not be an over exaggeration to say that it was Elphinstone who secured the Bombay Presidency for the EEIC by creating a system in which the Indians were made to feel as part of the system by justice and fairplay institutionalised by creation of laws, procedures and systems. Just compare the conduct of Elphinstone with racist behaviour of West Pakistani civil servants who served in East Pakistan during the first two decades after 1947!

Rajputana.

The Rajputs are a very brave and hardy race but they remained neutral during 1857. The answer for this inaction lies in the policy of neutrality followed by the Rajputs since 1707. The Rajputs somehow like Switzerland managed to stay neutral during the long period of anarchy which devastated most of India during the period from 1707 to 1849. The Mahrattas did not raid Rajputana as frequently as other areas because most of it was arid desert. The northern Mahrattas the Afghans had also for this purpose left Rajputana alone. The EEIC also because of the arid terrain avoided bothering the Rajputana states except having a small enclave at Ajmer. The Rajputana states were large in area and few in number and had a very small population. Thus the EEIC only held Ajmer territory while the remaining Rajputana was under local rulers who remained loyal throughout 1857. Many of their state troops rebelled but these were mostly Hindustani and marched towards Delhi or Central India after rebelling. The Rajputs thus remained neutral in 1857. They had no reason to rebel since they were not under the EEIC. Arid terrain more than martial fervour had saved Rajputana from EEIC colonialism and subjugation. Another major reason for Rajput neutrality was the simple fact that the entire area except Ajmer was ruled by local dynasties of long standing. The EEIC had never hurt Rajput pride thanks to their barren terrain!

End Notes

540Page-12-The Frontier Force Rifles-W.E.H Condon-Op Cit.

541As earlier quoted.

542Page-207-History of Delhi under the Later Mughals-Op Cit.

543Page-27 & 28-India's Struggle for Freedom-Op Cit. Pages-27 & 35-Cambridge History-The Indian Empire-1858-1918-Op Cit.

544Page-35-Cambridge History-1858-1918-Op Cit.

545Page-241-Dictionary of Modern Indian History-Op Cit.

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